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Recommended Citation

Dennis, David B.. "The Nazi War on Weimar 'Asphalt Culture'" for "Dissonance: Music and Globalization since Edison's Phonograph". Center for Advanced Study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, , : , 2015. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, History: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

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The Nazi War on Weimar “Asphalt” Culture

A Paper for the Seminar on “Dissonance” in
Weimar Culture

Center for Advanced Study

University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana

11 September 2015

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OPENING

Many thanks to Professors Kinderman and Liebersohn for the invitation to participate in this seminar.

It is a great pleasure to join you in discussing the issues of modernism in Weimar culture, and responses to it.

Professors Kinderman and Liebersohn have asked me to present some material from my recent book, *Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture* as it pertains to notions of “dissonance” during the Weimar Republic.

According to the syllabus for this seminar, you’ve read much in Eric Weitz’s *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* about “dissonances” of Weimar culture, as well as some reactions to them.

The readings I added, by Fritz Stern and George Mosse, were intended to provide you with deeper background about the anti-modernist culture that developed well before the Weimar era--actually in response to the unification of Germany and the industrial revolutions even prior to the First World War.

It is important to understand that what would become anti-dissonance *preexisted* the Weimar era. The lines for this war were drawn well in advance of the battles themselves.

This said, the Weimar Republic did become the battlefield for the most intense phases of this war and these “culture wars” were at the foundation of the struggle for and against the Republic.

My book, *Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture*, covers the Nazi side of this battle in some depth.

It is a survey of every significant article published in the main Nazi newspaper, the *Voelkischer Beobachter*.

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It presents and studies the ways in which Nazi propagandists worked to appropriate every major phase of Western cultural history by demonstrating that great creators and works shared, or would have shared, their ideological positions.

Its scope surveys Voelkischer Beobachter coverage of everything from the Ancient Greeks through the nineteenth century.

Paintings by George Grosz and Max Beckmann

-

Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*.

-

Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*

-

Bauhaus design

-

Collages and other experiments in “not making sense” by Hannah Hoch and the other Dadaists

-

“German Expressionist films” including *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Metropolis*, *M*, or *Berlin: Symphony of the City*

-

And so many other “masterpieces” of the modern/modernist era. [Weitz, 1]

He is also correct when he points out the sense of tension, crisis and foreboding that triggered many of these great works, giving them “dissonant” aspects that are both revered and cursed.

“All of Weimar’s protagonists, whatever their political and cultural proclivities, grappled with the tension-bound world of modernity. There was no escape. [Some] tried to avoid it by living in isolation in the Black Forest or as semi-recluses in apartments in Munich or villages in the Alps... Others actively embraced modernity by advocating mass politics and industrial society or by developing new forms of expression—abstract art, dissonant music, architecture of clean lines and industrial materials—that they believed captured the tensions, conflicts, and excitements of the age. Weimar culture and Weimar politics spawned so much creativity precisely because its artists, writers, and political organizers sought to unravel the meaning of modernity and to push it in new directions...” [Weitz, 4]

Weitz likewise points out that many of these trends were manifestations of post-First World War shock, as well as a sense of liberation that the horrors of war had apparently swept away institutions and restrictions of the Old Order.

“The Weimar era, with its heady enthusiasms, its artistic experimentation, its flaunting of sexuality and unconventional relations, its vibrant, kinetic energy, was a direct result of the vast disruptions of World War I, the distorted reverberations of its crashing destructiveness. An intense desire to grasp life in all its manifold dimensions, to experience love, sex, beauty, and power, fast cars and airborne flight, theater and dance crazes, arose out of the strong sense of the ephemeral character of life, of lives so quickly snuffed out or forever ruined by bullet wounds and gas attacks.” [Weitz, 11]

He continues, “The hyperactive vitality of Weimar culture... derived its intensity from the act of revolution, from the psychological sense of engagement, the heady enthusiasm, the notion that barriers had been broken and all things were possible.... Expressionism, cinema, literature, an explosive theatrical world—they all had their roots in the dual sensibility of the vast destructiveness of war and the powerful creativity of revolution. And they were sustained by the very fragility of Weimar’s political order, which lent a continual sense of edgy nervousness to Weimar society that imbued the cultural realm.” [Weitz, 26-27]

As he says, and as you can see in so many works of the period, but especially in the film, *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (which he covers) and in the Alfred Doeblin novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (which he could have covered more) people were both excited and shocked by the environment that resulted.

seemed to spring from it: the bourgeois life, Manchesterism, materialism, parliament and the parties, the lack of political leadership. Even more, they sensed in liberalism the source of all their inner sufferings. Theirs was a resentment of loneliness; their one desire was for a new faith, a new community of believers, a world with fixed standards and no doubts, a new national religion that would bind all Germans together.” [Stern, Cultural Despair, xii]

Further,

“The term ‘conservative revolution’ [here] denotes the ideological attack on modernity, on the complex of ideas and institutions that characterize our liberal, secular, and industrial civilization... Our Liberal and industrial society leaves many people dissatisfied –spiritually and materially. The spiritually alienated have often turned to the ideology of the conservative revolution. [Stern, Cultural Despair, xvi]

Clearly, the roots of this “politics of cultural despair” that Stern identified in this book, emerged as flowers of pure evil in response to the flagrantly modernizing environment of Weimar culture.

At around the same time, George L. Mosse found similar precedents for the cultural politics of anti-dissonance.

“The basic mood of the ideology is well summarized by the distinction between Culture and Civilisation, which was constantly on the lips of its adherents. A Culture, to recall Oswald Spengler’s words, has a soul, whereas Civilization is the ‘most external and artificial state of which humanity is capable.’ The acceptance of Culture and the rejection of Civilization meant for many people an end to alienation from their society... In this manner the isolation that they felt so deeply would be destroyed. The external was equated with present, disappointing society; the state was opposed to the Volk, and the divisive parliamentary politics contrasted with that organic unity for which so many Germans longed. [Mosse, Crisis, 6]

If this was true from the 1890s through the start of the First World War, it was exponentially more relevant among a growing “minority” of Germans during the era of Weimar challenges—in every sense of the word.

CONTRA ASPHALT

Cognizant of all this, we are now ready to hear precisely how the Nazi iterations of these views were deployed in the war against what we herald as “Weimar culture”—focusing on figures covered by Weitz, or whom you would surely recognize, as the students of William Kinderman and Harry Liebersohn.

From the perspective of the editors of and contributors to the main Nazi newspaper, *Völkischer Beobachter*, all political and cultural issues were a continuation of the Volkish reaction against modernity and modernist culture that had been going on since the second half of the nineteenth century.

Aligned with this task, every word of *Völkischer Beobachter* cultural coverage was a shot fired in the Weimar culture war. Creativity derided as “degenerate” was vilified as an antipode to the idealized *Kultur* that could provide a sense of order to the German present and future.¹

Döbblin

Primary targets of Nazi aggression were the writers it dismissed as “asphalt literati,” including Alfred Döbblin and Berthold Brecht.

Perhaps the most flagrant *Asphaltliterat*, in the paper’s view, was Alfred Döbblin—the creator of a “totally flat land” in contemporary literature which was most notably manifested in his “low-life novel,” *Berlin Alexanderplatz* [1929]. In such works, said the paper, Döbblin intended nothing less than to bring about a “decline in the level of cultivation” [which we can read as “Culture” or *Kultur*].²

Brecht

Even among such degenerate works, the paper reserved special criticism for *The Threepenny Opera* [1928], labeling it as the “craziest thing that Weimar society produced.” This “so-called opera stank with the contents of common

³“Die Dreigroschen-Oper: Ein Bankerott des Leipziger Spiessbürgertums,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 11 January 1929.

⁴F. A. Hauptmann, “Vom Leipziger Musikjudentum,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 24 February 1928. On Kurt Weill in this context, see Kater, *Composers of the Nazi Era*, 57-85.

⁵“Dreigroschenoper in Berlin,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 20 September 1928.

⁶F. A. Hauptmann, “Verjüdung des Leipziger Musiklebens: Eine neue und eine alte Judenoper,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 8 February 1929.

⁷“Noch einmal Die Dreigroschenoper in Leipzig,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 15 January 1929.

⁸T. F., “Mann über Liebermann,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 26 July 1927.

⁹R., “Thomas Mann und seine Sprößlinge,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 August 1928.

¹⁰Josef Stolzinger, “Thomas Mann als Nobelpreisträger,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 15 November 1929. For Mann’s relations with Nazi Germany, see Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998) 11-14, 79, 108, 130, 300, 337.

¹¹“Der Dessauer Bauhausfilm,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 16 June 1927.

¹²“Kandinsky als Zeichner,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 12 March 1932.

¹³“Der ärgerniserregende Freispruch im Falle George Grosz,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 16 April 1929. For more on the case, see Beth Irwin Lewis, *George Grosz: Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1971).

¹⁴Sela, “Schichtls musikalisches Raritätenkabinet oder Der tolle Nach-Fastnachtsspur,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 21 February 1923.

¹⁵“Jüdischer Terror in der Musik: Neue Musik--Paul Aron,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 6 January 1929.

¹⁶“Die Verjüdung u. Verfremdung unserer Opern Bühnen,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 1 July 1928-2 July 1928.

¹⁷Sela, “Schichtls musikalisches Raritätenkabinet oder Der tolle Nach-Fastnachtsspur.”

¹⁸“Jüdischer Terror in der Musik: Neue Musik--Paul Aron.”

¹⁹See Susan Cook, *Opera for a New Republic: The Zeitopern of Krenek, Weill and Hindemith* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988) 85-105 and 206-210 for a synopsis and discussion of this operetta. For more on Nazi attacks on the work, see Kater, *Composers of the Nazi Era*, 200-208.

²⁰F. A. Hauptmann, “Die erste Jazz-Oper. Von einem tschechischen Juden. Uraufführung in Leipzig,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 February 1927.

²¹Hauptmann, “Die erste Jazz-Oper. Von einem tschechischen Juden. Uraufführung in Leipzig.”

²²“Der Kampf um ‘Jonny’,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 11 December 1927.

²³Hans Buchner, “Krenek’s Jazzoper ‘Jonny’,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 20 December 1927.

²⁴J. B., “Jonny spielt auf und die Polizei tanzt,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 June 1928.

²⁵Wilhelm Weiss, “Jonny in München,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 June 1928.

²⁶“Die Verjüdung u. Verfremdung unserer Opern Bühnen.”

²⁷“Arteigene und artfremde Musik,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 10 November 1931.

²⁸Hugo Rasch, “Festliche Tage in Bayreuth,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 6 August 1933.

²⁹Hans Buchner, “Bemerkungen zu den Münchner Festspielen,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 August 1920. For more on Schoenberg in the Nazi era, see Kater, *Composers of the Nazi Era*, 183-210.

³⁰Buchner, “Von zwei Welten in der Musik.”

³¹Sela, “Schichtls musikalisches Raritätenkabinet oder Der tolle Nach-Fastnachtsspur.”

³²Hans Buchner, “Elektra,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 24 August 1923.

³³F. A. Hauptmann, “Alcina von Händel: Uraufführung in Leipzig,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 24 June 1928.

³⁴“Musik-Auffassung von gestern: Vortrag Arnold Schoenbergs in der Gesellschaft für Neue Musik,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 24 February 1933.

³⁵Ludwig K. Mayer, “Musik in unserer Zeit,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 18 December 1938.